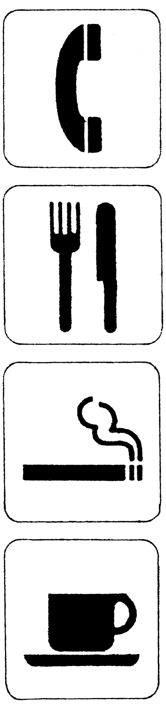
Pictograms and ideograms

Cave drawings may serve to record some event (e.g. Humans 3, Buffaloes 1), but they are not usually thought of as any type of specifically linguistic message. They are usually treated as part of a tradition of pictorial art. When some of the 'pictures' came to represent particular images in a consistent way, we can begin to describe the product as a form of picture-writing, or **pictograms**. In this way, a form such as  might come to be used for the sun. An essential part of this use of a representative symbol is that everyone should use a similar form to convey a roughly similar meaning. That is, a conventional relationship must exist between the symbol and its interpretation.

In time, this picture might develop into a more fixed symbolic form, such as ☉, and come to be used for 'heat' and 'daytime', as well as for 'sun'. Note that as the symbol extends from 'sun' to 'heat', it is moving from something visible to something conceptual (and no longer a picture). This type of symbol is then considered to be part of a system of idea-writing, or **ideograms**. The distinction between pictograms and ideograms is essentially a difference in the relationship between the symbol and the entity it represents. The more 'picture-like' forms are pictograms and the more abstract derived forms are ideograms.

A key property of both pictograms and ideograms is that they do not represent words or sounds in a particular language. Modern pictograms, such as those represented in the accompanying illustration, are language-independent and can be understood with much the same basic conventional meaning in a lot of different places where a number of different languages are spoken.



It is generally thought that there were pictographic or ideographic origins for a large number of symbols that turn up in later writing systems. For example, in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the symbol 𓉐 was used to refer to a house and derived from the diagrammatic representation of the floor-plan of a house. In Chinese writing, the character 川 was used for a river, and had its origins in the pictorial representation of a stream flowing between two banks. However, it is important to note that neither the Egyptian nor the Chinese written symbols are actually 'pictures' of a house or a river. They are more abstract. When we create symbols in a writing system, there is always an abstraction away from the physical world.

When the relationship between the symbol and the entity or idea becomes sufficiently abstract, we can be more confident that the symbol is probably being used to represent words in a language. In early Egyptian writing, the ideogram for water was 𓈗. Much later, the derived symbol 𓈖 came to be used for the actual word meaning 'water'. When symbols are used to represent words in a language, they are described as examples of word-writing, or 'logograms'.